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Book Review

Farzaneh Goshtasb, *Āzar Kayvān: Zendegī Nāme, Āthār va ʻAqā`ed*, Tehran, 2021.

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1. Introduction

This is a 392-page, extensive Persian book published in Tehran in November 2021. The biography, achievements, and ideologies of Azar Kayvan (1533–1618), who lived in Safavid Iran and Mughal India in the 16th and 17th centuries are covered, as the title of the book implies. First, I want to commend the author for having the courage to write a book about a mystical philosopher who falls into a rather minor category in the intellectual history of the contemporary Persian world. I hope that this achievement will elevate a minor to a position where people in Iran and India will realize his significance. The author is Farzaneh Goshtasb (1973–), who is currently an Associate Professor at the Institute of Humanities and Culture in Iran. She is a Zoroastrian lady with only 0.03% of Iran's population. The author's possible research motivation is the fact that Azar Kayvan was regarded as a Zoroastrian priest-thinker in the history of modern Zoroastrianism in the research stage of the 20th century, which is why the issue is important. Nevertheless, the more the author researched, the more she is forced to come to conclude that Azar Kayvan was not a Zoroastrian.

2. Material foundation

The conventional research has unavoidably made material difficulties when Azar Kayvan is viewed as an "Azar Kayvan School" that comprises not only himself but

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also his direct and indirect disciples. Nearly three generations have attended this school, which emigrated from Iran to India around 1580–90, in the middle of the Azar Kayvan's active period. The lower limit of their activity is 1652, the year when Mobed Shah, a member of the third generation, is documented to have survived. The only source often utilized to reconstruct their actions is Mobed Shah's Persian work *Dabestan-e Mazaheb*, which has no direct acquaintance with Azar Kayvan, and the date of its extant manuscripts was considerably later. Reconstructing the history of the Azar Kayvan School in light of this material reality was therefore rather challenging. However, in 2021, this difficulty could be resolved by two methods. The first is the discovery of a new manuscript of *Dabestan-e Mazaheb* (p. 56), which also happens to contain the author's autograph written in 1650. This considerably improved the understanding of *Dabestan-e Mazaheb's* content and made it clear that the real name of the person with the pseudonym "Mobed Shah" was "Mirza Zulfakar Azar Sasani."

The second is the whole usage of *Sharestan-e Chahar Chaman* (hereinafter *Sharestan*), a book written by Azar Kayvan's direct disciple Bahram Farhad (d. 1624) (pp. 81–82). This book is a known document, and a lithograph was published in Bombay in 1854. However, researchers, including this reviewer, have not paid sufficient attention to it because it is a rare book, and the fourth part of the four-part structure is missing. When used, nevertheless, this book was a treasure trove of information about the Azar Kayvan School.

The author also provides manuscript information for eight Azar Kayvan School literature (pp. 49–82). I want to commend her work, but it has the drawback that she provides manuscript information far too comprehensively, and some of them may be superfluously suspected to be unnecessary. Only if such writings were prior to the publication of lithography would their information be useful. However, because the author's manuscript material is devoid of dates, we are unable to assess its academic worth. For instance, as far as this reviewer is aware, only one of the four manuscripts described by the author of *Jam-e KayKhosrow*, a book authored by Azar Kayvan himself, has a date prior to the release of lithography. This is a minor flaw, though. The worth of this book relies on how much information the author extracts from *Sharestan*, the source on which she places the greatest focus. Let us now concentrate on this aspect.

3. Ancient Persian Illuminative School

Let us start by discussing the self-awareness of the philosophers known as the "Azar Kayvan School." This point was rather ambiguous because Mobed Shah gave themselves more than ten distinct names and Azar Kayvan was unable to utilize such a name. However, it was stated in *Sharestan* that Zu al-'Ulum Azar Kayvan was one to inherit it "after the death of Shaykh al-Ishraq Suhrawardi" (p. 27). In addition, according to Bahram Farhad (p. 31), "Azar is not fire, but light in Persian," and he refers to their institution as the "Azar School" while characterizing it as the "Illuminative School" in Persian. The self-regulation of the "illuminative school" may be unequivocally proved in the generation of Azar Kayvan's close followers.

What connection do they have to Zoroastrianism, then? Bahram Farhad argued that "Zoroastrians (NP. *Beh Din*) are surface worshipers (NP. *Zaher parast*)" (p. 31) and "Azar school and Zoroastrians are different" (p. 32). He then denied the relationship between the two. Citing the Hadith "Qurayshs for Arabs and Persians for Iranians" he said, "Azar school are Persians, but not all Iranians," (p. 29), and asserted the superiority of Persians among Iranians (p. 30). In other words, the Azar school is a successor of the so-called the Illuminative philosophy, which is a kind of ancient Persian wisdom that is different from Zoroastrianism[1].

The literature of the (real) Illuminative School was, however, misrepresented as the Azar school's heritage from their Persian ancestors, according to the author's interpretation. The author collects and examines the fragments of the lost works of the Azar Kayvan School from *Sharestan*. She claims that material from Suhrawardi's *Talwihat* and Dawwani's *Lawa'mi'* was used in Azar Kayvan's dissipated book *Ain-e Iskandar* (p. 86). *Partow Farhang*, the equally lost book of Azar Kayvan, has an excerpt from Jalal al-Din Dawwani's another book (p. 87). Suhrawardi's book is where a portion of the equally lost work *Takht-e Taqdis* is taken (p. 89). A translation of Qutb al-Din Shirazi's *Hikmat al-Ishraq* into Persian may be found in *Zar Dast Afshar*, which was authored by Azar Kayvan's pupil (p. 79). The "Azar school" refers to itself as the "Illuminative School" since, roughly speaking, the literature of Islamic Illuminative philosophy from the 12th century onward was provisionally entrusted to the "wisdom of ancient Persia before Islam." The author's accomplishment in elucidating this argument through a thorough philological analysis is impressive.

4. the Illuminative School and *Dasatir*

The relationship between their strong inclination toward Illuminative philosophy and the so-called ancient Persian scripture *Dasatir* puzzles this reviewer. The culmination of the prophecies of the ancient Persian prophets, *Dasatir*, is written in the artificial language called *Asmani*, sometimes referred to as "Old Persian" and annotated in "Pure Persian." It could have been the work of Azar Kayvan himself. It should, of course, be the centerpiece of the literature of the Azar Kayvan School, but none of the *Asmani* texts from this school are now in print, and there are only a handful of comments that are in "Pure Persian" (p. 72).

In response to this situation, "the modern *Dasatir* was founded after the death of Azar Kayvan (p. 74), and the *Asmani* language was likewise fashioned after his death," (p. 75). Although this reviewer doubts it, this interpretation is technically plausible. The reviewer is persuaded that the author is not aware that Ali Ashraf Sadegi notes in a 2020 article[2] that "*Asmani* vocabulary is present in the Persian dictionary of the Delhi-Sultanate period before Azar Kayvan's birth." In other words, "*Dasatir and Asmani* language were founded before Azar Kayvan and subsequently integrated into the Azar Kayvan School," appears more logically consistent than the author's argument.

5. Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism

Beyond Zoroastrianism, Azar Kayvan was self-employed as the orthodox successor of the "Ancient Persian Illuminative School." Zoroastrianism is included in the teachings of ancient Persia throughout their philosophical past. The logic is as follows: first, Suhrawardi's testimony confirms Zoroaster's status as a prophet (p. 122). If so, there should be a reference to Zoroaster in the Quran, and surprisingly enough Zoroaster is another name for Ibrahim (p. 124). Unfortunately, the *Zand* Avesta that Zoroaster delivered is written in a symbolic language and necessitates *Ta'wil* (Ar. Mysterious interpretation), although having the same authority as Dasertir (p. 182). Furthermore, according to *Sharestan*, the Zoroastrian *Farrah* (NP. Zoroastrian glory ring) is a source of the ideal human (Ar. al-insan al-kamil), and the *Herbed* priest (NP. one of the Zoroastrian priesthood's ranks) denotes the Sufi (p. 195). (p. 231). With this theoretical foundation, the Azar Kayvan School evaluated Zoroastrianism favorably. I believe this reviewer is not the only one who perceives the ideological influence of the Isma'ilis on *Ta'wil*'s phrasing. The Zoroaster = Abraham theory is, of course, the old theory of the Eastern Syriac Church. For this

reviewer, only the "*Herbed* Priest = Sufi" theory and the "*Farrah* = the origin of perfect human" theory appear to be the originality of the Azar Kayvan School.

Bahram Farhad holds a favorable opinion of both Zoroastrianism and the association between the Azar Kayvan School and Manichaeism (p. 102). From an Islamic perspective, the idea that Mar Mani is regarded as a prophet (p. 103) is a Copernican Revolution. Azar Kayvan appears to have been a guy who placed greater emphasis on Persian customs and was comparatively free from Islamic norms. Because Mar Mani is from Babylon, the author should have discussed Azar Kayvan's *Iranian* background from a broader perspective, in my opinion, if she had explored this topic further.

6. Intellectual Milieu of the Azar Kayvan School

Next, let us take up the intellectual milieu of 16th-century Iran and India, which led to Azar Kayvan the inspiration for this thought. However, it is Bahram Farhad, not Azar Kayvan, who allows us to pinpoint the specific genealogy of the teachers and the horizontal connections among thinkers of the same age. *Sharestan* claims that Bahram Farhad's predecessors go back to Bahram Farhad ⇒ Jalal al-Din Mahmud Shirazi ⇒ Ghiyath al-Din Mansur ⇒ Molla Jalal al-Din Dawwani (p. 38). Indeed, Dawwani (d. 1502) is an Islamic thinker who was active in the Persian region. Bahram Farhad's writings have a strong Shiite inclination, according to what this reviewer has studied; therefore, it is obvious that he was born and raised in Iran in the 16th century. Then, it is geographically justified for him to claim to be "the successor to the knowledge of ancient Persia" (p. 23), as he is reported to originate from Estakhr. The names of other contemporary intellectuals who interacted with the Azar Kayvan School in *Sharestan*, including Mir Fendereski, Shaykh Baha'i, Mir Damad, Shaykh Fayzi, Abu'l-Fazl, Shah Fath Allah Shirazi, Qadi Nur Allah Shushtari, Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi, Ghiyath al-Din Mansur Dashtaki, Kamal al-din Shirwani, and Jamal al-din Mahmud Shirazi (pp. 112–114). At the time, it undoubtedly covered Iranian and Indian thinkers, but regrettably, it cannot be backed by other sources. "Although Azar Kayvan usually hid himself from the secular world, he revealed himself only in his writings. In addition to being familiar with various miraculous studies, he was collecting Persian vocabulary" (p. 28), but it's possible that this explanation may not be the reason his name is not included in objective materials.

Additionally, the author highlights the relationship between Azar Kayvan and Akbar Shah (reigned 1556–1605) in the context of the universal religion *Din-e Ilahi* (p. 126). There is certainly a description of it in *Sharestan*, but it is best to consider it to be a testimonial from only one side as long as the description of the Azar Kayvan School cannot be confirmed in the materials on the Akbar Shah side, such as the works of Abu'l-Fazl. This reviewer is cautious about the author's emphasis on this point.

As for later intellectuals, Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi, Muhammad Sayyid Isfahani, and Bahram Farshad are said to be the disciples of Bahram Farhad (p. 38). But the reviewer did not know who they were. Moreover, Kaykhusraw Esfandiyar is usually considered to be the son of Azar Kayvan, but the author denies this (p. 47).

7. Abstinence training, Universal Religion, Reincarnation

Besides the Illuminative philosophy, the author believes that the Azar Kayvan School practices 1. abstinence training, 2. universal religion, and 3. reincarnation. Let us briefly summarize these points.

The classification of religious intellectuals as Islamic theologians (Ar. *Mutakallimun*), religious ascetics as Islamic mystics (Ar. *Sufi*), nonreligious intellectuals as Peripatetic School, and nonreligious ascetics as Illuminative School is the first distinguishing characteristic (p. 107). Furthermore, Sharestan claims that Iranians are "very compatible with abstinence training" despite the 12 Imam Shiites being opposed to it (p. 203). (p. 205). It appears that the Illuminative School placed more stress on obtaining self-awareness through "presential knowledge (Ar. *huduri*)" than it did on developing a new philosophical theory to counter the Peripatetic School, at least according to Bahram Farhad's understanding of it. The second characteristic—which is derived from the first—is an orientation toward the global religion. Therefore, it follows from this reasoning that "there is no difference in religion before the abstinence training" (p. 207). Unfortunately, it goes against the Azar Kayvan School's heavy emphasis on ancient Persia. On this issue, a separate justification would have been required[3]. The third characteristic is considered by Azar Kayvan to vary from Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina because he believes in reincarnation (p. 108). However, in their own opinion, Hoshang, Siyamak, Agathodaemon, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Suhrawardi, etc. are reported to have supported the reincarnation belief (p. 165). Islamic philosophers appear to be out of the mainstream of the history of world thought. This reviewer would like to

speculate that their reincarnation idea was influenced by Isma'ili *Tanasukh* or Hinduism.

8. Conclusion

This book has a sensible introduction and as many as six appendices, but no overall conclusions. It may thus be claimed that the Azar Kayvan School was not Zoroastrians but rather a group of thinkers working for a universal religion in Safavid Iran and Mughal India if this reviewer puts everything together on behalf of the author. It could be a manifestation of the "desire for a universal religion" that has appeared intermittently in the history of Iranian thought, such as Manichaeism in the Sasanian Empire and Baha'ism in Qajarid Iran. *Dasatir* may be an effort at Esperanto in the Persian cultural milieu of the early modern era given that the *Asmani* language used there is also a complete language with features of Hindustani and Turkish utilized in medieval India.

However, there is also a contradiction between the Azar Kayvan School here. Their foundation is a Persian notion, and Persian nationalism is their source. Daniel Sheffield has previously made this issue clear, stating that "the *Hurufi* and *Nuqtawi* schools have a crucial role in the formation of the Azar Kayvan School,"[4] but this book makes no mention of Daniel Sheffield's assertion. This is a regrettable point because Sheffield's treatises would be familiar to the author. Nonetheless, this book provides a complete overview of the entire subject and shows the present state of the Azar Kayvan School study. I would like to expect that an English translation will be published as soon as possible.

Endnotes

1. See Kianoosh Rezania, "Did the Āẕar Kaivānīs Know Zoroastrian Middle Persian Sources?" in *Entangled Religions: Safavid and Mughal Empires in Contact: Intellectual and Religious Exchanges between Iran and India in the Early Modern Era*, Vol. 13 No. 5, 2022 (View of Did the Āẕar Kaivānīs Know Zoroastrian Middle Persian Sources? (rub.de)).

2. See ʿAlī Ašraf Ṣādeghī, "Āyā hama-ye Loġāt-e Dasātīrī barsāḫta-ye peyrovān-e Āzar Kaivān ast?" *Journal of Iranian Studies* XVI (Osaka University, Japan): 96-100, 2020.

3. See Takeshi Aoki, "The Dasātīr and the "Ā□ar Kaivān school" in Historical Context: Origin and Later Development," in *Entangled Religions: Safavid and Mughal Empires*

in Contact: Intellectual and Religious Exchanges between Iran and India in the Early Modern Era, Vol. 13 No. 5, 2022 (View of The Dasātīr and the "Āẕar Kaivān school" in Historical Context: Origin and Later Development (rub.de)).

4. See Daniel J. Sheffield, "The Language of Heaven in Safavid Iran: Speech and Cosmology in the Thought of Āẕar Kaivān and His Followers." In *No Tapping Around Philology: A Festschrift in Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston Jr.ʼs 70th Birthday*, edited by Alireza Korangy and Daniel J. Sheffield, 161-83. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014.